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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 001480

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SUBJECT: SOLID MINERALS MINISTER EZEKWESILI SHARES HER
SUCCESSION THOUGHTS

Classified By: Consul General Brian L. Browne for Reason 1.4 (D)

1. (C) Summary: In an August conversation with the Consul General, Minister of Solid Minerals Oby Ezekwesili stressed the President will step down in 2007. Despite urging from several quarters to prolong his tenure, Obasanjo wants to make room for a reformer from the next generation of Nigerian politicians. Obasanjo vehemently opposed the presidential aspirations of former head of state Babangida, Vice President Atiku and former Lagos military governor Marwa, said Ezekwesili, a member of Obasanjo's inner circle of economics reformers. To off-balance his enemies, to keep his allies on his side for as long as possible, and to prevent himself from being deemed a lameduck, Obasanjo will not reveal his true intentions (retirement) until the eleventh hour, Ezekwesili forecasted. End summary.

OBASANJO GENERATION'S FINAL CHAPTER?

2. (C) During a late August conversation, Solid Minerals Minister Oby Ezekwesili told the Consul General that President Obasanjo was under tremendous pressure to remain in office beyond 2007. In addition to the political hacks and presidential courtiers who flock to Aso Villa, Obasanjo was being pressed by some respected voices inside and outside Nigeria. These voices were hard for Obasanjo to ignore, Ezekwesili maintained. Most of Nigeria's leading businessmen have privately asked Obasanjo to continue in office. Many African leaders have also given private counsel that he should stay for the good of the continent. (Comment: Ezekwesili acknowledged that some leaders who wanted Obasanjo to remain were acting in their own benighted self-interest. Many of the leaders want to remain in power themselves. Should Obasanjo extend his tenure, it would make it fashionable for them to do the same. Something similar can be said of Obasanjo's support among Nigerian business leaders. The administration has been good to certain key businesspeople and they to it. Predictably, these business figures would like to continue this profitable relationship. End comment.)

3. (C) Nevertheless, Ezekwesili said President Obasanjo would step aside for a like-minded reformer of the next generation of Nigerian politicians. Ezekwesili, a close and staunch supporter of the President, said she has discussed the issue with the President several times. During each discussion, his focus has been on protecting his legacy as a democratic reformer. The only way to do this was to relinquish power in 2007. While in the short term the benefits to remaining are clearly apparent, Obasanjo feared that tinkering with the constitution could do long-term harm by setting a precedent that could allow a truly ruthless individual to perpetuate himself in power. Conversely, the problems with leaving office in 2007 were manifold; much work needed to be done on many fronts to ensure democracy takes firm root. The most obvious problem was the identification of a successor. Obasanjo thought it time to close the book on his generation, with his administration being the final chapter for a generation that has ruled and more often misruled Nigeria for over roughly 30 years, Ezekwesili opined.

4. (C) Ezekwesili stressed that Obasanjo recoiled from the notion of Vice President Atiku, former Head of State Babangida or former Lagos Governor Marwa succeeding him. Leaving Nigeria in the hands of one of these three, who currently are the PDP's leading candidates, was a prospect that tormented the President. Ezekwesili declared, "Never, never, never!" to the idea of one of this trio ascending to the presidency. Ezekwesili stressed Obasanjo was seriously ruminating about the question of his successor. She thought the President would suffer the public speculation and suspicion that he wants to remain in power after 2007. The most important thing for the President was getting the succession right. If he had to endure bad press and comments in the interim, Obasanjo was willing to do so, she asserted.

5. (C) She indicated Obasanjo was viewing several governors as well as a few current ministers as potential successors.

Ezekwesili predicted Obasanjo would tarry until the last moment before he publicly committed to a successor. This way he would keep the Babangidas and Atikus on their haunches - they could not make a decision until he did. They must then temporize. Also, it would keep his genuine as well as convenient allies in line. Until he anointed someone, all factions that sought his blessings would continue to curry his favor by acting according to his aims. Once he identified his favorite, some of the losers might become active dissidents, reasoned Ezekwesili.

16. (C) Comment: Ezekwesili is very close to and fond of the President. Thus, she sees him as many Nigerians do not and she gives the most charitable explanations to his actions, again, a predilection many Nigerians do not share. Yet, we believe she has honestly recounted her discussions with Obasanjo. He probably has told her he will leave. However, he has probably told advisors of a less principled mold than Ezekwesili that he is inclined to renew his lease on Aso Villa. This may be part of a deliberate tack by Obasanjo to keep everyone guessing or it could be the action of a usually decisive man caught on the horns of one of his life's and his nation's greatest dilemmas. End comment.

17. (U) This cable has been cleared by Embassy Abuja.
BROWNE